The Valley Holds More

Place, Recognition, and Civic Poetics in ***Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate & The Groaning Book: A Poetics***

KC Clarke

It's not clear how a region recognizes its own poetry anymore. Not in any consistent way. The signals are there occasionally, books published, readings given, coverage in local media, but they don't accumulate. They disperse. A book of poems can be written within a place, shaped by it over years, even decades, and still pass through that place without being taken up by it in any lasting way.

There were earlier attempts to gather the Midwest in poetry. In 1967, Lucien Stryk edited *Heartland: Poets of the Midwest*, an anthology that proposed the region as something already alive with poetry. The book now reads like an act of recognition.

Many of the poets gathered in *Heartland* would go on to become widely recognized, but the anthology catches them early, before their artistic work had fully formed and before the region had loosened its claim on them. Now, the list is almost strange in retrospect, Gwendolyn Brooks, Paul Carroll, Robert Bly, James Wright, James Tate, Mary Oliver,

William Stafford, because many of them are no longer consistently held as Midwestern poets, even when the region helped form them.

In graduate school I studied under James Reiss, a New York-based poet teaching in the Midwest. I was still forming my voice, but the place my writing came from was already set, even if I didn't have language for it yet. Mostly the Midwest. That has remained. At one point he characterized me as a "country poet," maybe in passing, maybe in fun, but it landed as a kind of sorting. He was from the city. I was from here. He could leave. I was, at least at the time, fixed.

It wasn't argued out. It didn't need to be. The categories arrived before the work did, city and country, center and elsewhere, mobility and stasis. There was an assumption underneath it that being from here carried a different weight. As if the poetry might not travel in the same way. As if it might not fully register as poetry at all or would have to be translated before it could be taken up. My poems had not fully formed, but the frame around them had. For many of the years after, I was placing other poets' work, not my own. My poems stayed underneath, accumulating long before they arrived as a book.

That work entered through readings, in small rooms and large, at institutional edges and institutions themselves, and through programs that placed the work beside other artistic work and before an audience that didn't need it explained in advance. It also happened in public school classrooms, inviting students to read poems and write their own in response.

These programs, poems, and poets mattered because they were encountered, in hallways, on billboards, in the hands of students and strangers. One of those billboards carried Mark Strand. "You there, / Come with me into the world of light and be whole." Chicago. Street level. No explanation required. Prestige was never the goal. Presence was. The civic was a way of working.

My poems evolved alongside that labor, sometimes inside it, sometimes adjacent, always in relation to structures that allowed encounter. They asked for a similar kind of attention. They began in place.

The Cuyahoga runs through a valley cut long before the poem, long before the bridge, long before any of it needed naming. In "The Humming Bridge," the river is there, the gorge is there, the span is there. What the poem does not say keeps moving underneath it: the grandfather who built the bridge, the family set down in the valley for generations, older labor and settlement packed into the ground below the lines. None of that is announced. The bridge hums, the poem knows, not for the people crossing it: "I know it's not humming for us / but for the layered gorge / the Cuyahoga River / the hardwood forests." The speaker hears it and forces air through the throat in return, "harmonizing with mechanical / and angelic orders," not to be heard, not to be

recognized, but to enter what is already sounding. The land was not waiting for permission or translation. The poem sings back anyway.

If "The Humming Bridge" rises toward the gorge, "Mercury Fish" drops immediately into another register. The river is lower here, down from Cleveland, along the floodwall, carrying contamination, static, and ordinary use in the same current. The poem never insists that it is the Cuyahoga, but it reads that way: the catfish heavy with mercury, the dead batteries, the AM radio tuned to the Indians, Billy and Frank holding their place by the water with Milwaukee's Best and whatever the day will give them. They are two men fishing a river they probably should not eat from, one for sustenance, one for something closer to habit or ritual, though the distinction never fully holds. The poem lets the place carry its own charge. By the end, the crowd sound from the stadium echoes under the bridge arch and "something like god" arrives not as revelation but as static, half-caught, nearly missed. The poem hears it. The men do not. The river goes on carrying both kinds of knowledge.

Same river, different pitch. In one poem the bridge hums for the gorge and the hardwood forests. In the other, the charge comes through floodwall, radio signal, contaminated catch, and the ordinary patience of men who have shown up again. The land is still not waiting. It is still sounding.

The poems in *Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate* make a strange Midwestern city unto itself. The companion volume, *The Groaning Book,* stands at its edge like a visitors center, offering bearings, not instructions. It can orient the reader to the conditions of entry, bridges, floodwalls, weather, static, prayer, damage, humor, endurance, but it cannot walk the city for you. It is a collection of poems written across Northeast Ohio, Chicago, and the Midwest over time, rooted in specific places: Garfield Heights, Newburgh, the South Loop, downtown streets, river corridors, small rooms, industrial edges. They are the ground the poems come from.

What holds them together is not geography alone, but recurrence, structures, sounds, pressures that appear again and again in different forms. The river. The bridge. The room. The signal. The act of staying. The poems do not map the region. They move through it. Like the cities it comes from, it was built for use before it was built for meaning.

The Cuyahoga Valley holds more than the poems announce. One family arrived in 1802 and built into the ground over generations, long enough to engineer its bridges. Another arrived later from Scotland and Northern Ireland, speaking the wrong language, and two of the men were dead of the water before the place had fully taken them in. Their families, broken, stayed. The ground did not change for them. They are in the valley still, in Harvard Grove Cemetery, in unmarked graves, in the poems.

This is what writing from a place means: place as condition, older than backdrop, credential, or regional color. Recognition may disperse. Prestige may never gather. Civic structures may carry the work for a time and then recede. The land was not waiting for permission. It has more than enough to offer anyone who shows up and pays attention.

About the Author: KC Clarke is the author of *Between Here and the Sound of a Groaning Interstate* and *The Groaning Book: A Poetics*, and of *Wolves and Flax: The Prior Family in the Cuyahoga Valley Wilderness*. His professional life has included leadership in literary centers, museums, libraries, and nonprofit institutions, as well as editorial and creative direction for numerous books. He writes from within the civic and cultural infrastructure this essay describes.